

Digital Revolution



The Free Flow of Music

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By Andy Michels

The wall of sound that we've created is tagged with such graffiti that a passerby would seek out doors and ways to ENTER. Once inside a world defined by dreams come true they'd find aligned with the simplest act of sharing what we treasure. Most people aren't aware of the world of art and commerce where exploitation strips each artist down to nigger. Each label, like apartheid, multiplies us by our divide and whips us 'til we conform to lesser figures. What falls between the cracks is a pile of records stacked to the heights of talents hidden from the sun. Yet the energy they put into popularizing smut makes a star of a shiny polished gun. The ballot or the bullet for Mohawk or the mullet is a choice between new times and dying days. And the only way to choose is to jump ship from old truths and trust dolphins as we swim through changing ways. The ways of middlemen

proves to be just a passing trend. We need no priests to talk to God. No phone to call her. And when you click the link below, i think it fair that you should know that your purchase will make middlemen much poorer...

---- Saul Williams

The music industry has kept a wide gap between artists and fans for far too long. They built a wall of capitalism and financial gain, which has severed the emotional and spiritual tie between fans and musicians. As availability of digital music progresses, artist such as Saul Williams begins to quicken the crumble of the industrial music wall by shrinking the gap between fans and artists. His statement above was the conglomeration of echoes of thousands of mistreated fans and artists which has bubbled up inside him. Along with

artist Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails, Williams is a prophet sent to bring the artist back in touch with the fan and to patch together the heart and spirit of music. Both artists have released entirely free and digital albums online. This transformative event makes the music industry an obsolete middleman and the artists and fans the pavers of their musical destiny. The music industry has ruled this scene for far too long, and it is important to understand how they became this totalitarian conglomeration over music because soon, free flowing digital music will bring about their demise.

The Divide and Caging of the Musical Spirit and the Building of the Wall

In the beginning the music industry wall was more of a bridge to guide artists and to link fans with music. It promoted the creativity of music and was essential in spreading artists' music world wide. If not for this bridge, many musicians, such as Elvis and the Beatles, would not have been heard. And this is still how music industry views itself today. The RIAA (Recording Industry Association of America) calls itself an:

Organization committed to helping the music business thrive. Our goal is to foster a business and legal climate that protects the ability of our members – the record companies that create, manufacture and/or distribute some 90 percent of all legitimate sound recordings produced and sold in the United States – to invest in the next generation of music. (RIAA)

And if this were still true, there would be no conflict. But the sad truth is that this mission of the RIAA has become warped and corroded over time. The relationship of fans, artist, and the industry was all well and good until the music industry started looking towards quantity of money rather than quality of product. The top record labels began to buy out small independent labels until there were only four major labels left. They are known as the "Big 4": EMI, AOL/Time Warner, Sony BMG, and UMG (Park 24). The Big Four soon began their reign and tightened their strangle hold on creativity.

First they shrunk the amount of signed artists on their labels (Park 32). This caused less music availability and diversity. Next, the Big 4 only allowed exclusive music at certain stores (Park 33). By issuing CDs with exclusive tracks to different stores, the Big 4 was able to turn a higher profit because some people would buy each issue of the CD just for the extra tracks. They also begun to reissue older records and tapes into newer "enhanced" CD formats (Kusek 82). They caged the musical spirit into an endless array of formats with little artistic differences. This manipulated the fans' love for music by forcing them to repurchase previously owned music to maintain their connection with the artist. But this connection was always there. It was just fogged up by endless money generating formats.

As if this control over music was not enough, the Big 4 began to only promote artists that gave up most of their rights over their music (Park 34). The artists was stripped from their creation and forced to allow the Big 4 to adopt it as their own. Once the Big 4 had their control over the creative flow of music, they could start bending it towards their needs.

Soon after, the music industry started to manufacture music for increased financial gain as if it were not a form of free flowing art, but rather a product solely produced for profit. Because it was financially unproductive to search for new talent, the Big 4 began to form teams of people to write and produce pop music for the artist (Park 35). With this the artist is not the master of the music but rather the ambassador of it. And also because the music is produced by many of the same teams (Park 35), the music begins to sound the same. Diversity and creativity is lost.

Then to further the soulless manufacturing of music, the Big 4 infested in hit song science software (Park 35). This software "analyses the beat, harmony, pitch, octave, and other patterns in new songs, which are then compared to previously released hit songs in order to gage the potential of the new music" (Park 35). This makes the music base itself of past music, which then leaves it in a static standstill where the evolution

of music is absent. Because of this artist now had to conform to what science declares is worthy to listen to rather than the diversity of the fans. Music is now not the product of the artists, but rather the cage which restrains their talents.

After closing the front door to creativity by limiting signable artists to a small, manageable group, the Big 4 went ahead and locked the back door, the radio, which was once a lucrative artist-to-fan outlet. The Big 4 first paid major radio stations to play certain music, then they bought ad spots to play their music in, and then, because of the continuous air play caused by the first two actions, these songs made it to the top of the charts (Park 36-37). The radio then became a form of propaganda because it continuously hammered songs into the



head of radio listeners. Listeners were lead to believe that songs on the radio are the cream of the crop. This action then branched out to effect hard format (tapes, records, and CDs) sales and the demand for the "popular" songs.

But soon after, with the release of the musical spirit from its constricting hard format body by the introduction of digital music, music becomes free flowing again. It is widely available and easily obtained by everyone around the world. It captured new fans, discovered new artists, diversified itself, and brought everyone back together surrounded by this new revolution.

The Digital Children

Before the discussion of the release of the spirit of music, one must understand the crowd that harvested this spirit and pushed it along. These are the digital children. The digital children are a group that is surrounded by free flowing information accessible through the Internet (Kusek 99). This group understands the value of free flowing information and how it effects the growth of information and creative flow. They look at music, just like other information, as free flowing and belonging to the people. They seen no reason why it shouldn't be networked and shared to others along with the large amounts of other information they pass to one another.

A portion of this group is also involved in the green community. This group understands the importance of environmental sustenance through recycling, discovery of new fuel sources, and anti-pollution movements. Digital information free from plastic, paper, and metal embodiments is incredibly convenient for them along with ethically sound. In fact, 100,000 pounds of CDS go to landfills monthly (Brentano) and these CDS are also known to create environmental and health problems, such as global warming, when created and destroyed (Brentano). They feel very entitled and environmentally friendly in taking advantage of free flowing digital information.

The digital children set the

One Study "estimated a net difference of approximately one 1 kilogram of greenhouse emissions between physical and electronic distribution (assuming that the electronic media isn't simply burned onto a CD by the recipient)" (Brentano).

The Release of the Musical Spirit and the Pirate Revolution

In June 1999 a digital child name Shawn Fanning created the first file-sharing system called Napster. It was the first time that music was linked through the Internet to be shared between various persons. A digital music commune was soon erected, apart from the Big 4, that allowed people to freely share music that inspired them and to upload music that they felt would inspire others. It was a boom of musical discovery and passion. People weren't subjected to propaganda music they've heard on the radio repeatedly, but rather opened to a massive amount of underground music they didn't know existed. Fans were brought to hidden artists and the artists gladly revealed themselves, even without the help of the Big 4 marketing campaign.

One of these musical groups revealed by the pirate revolution was the Arctic Monkeys. After they handed out free demo CDs at one of their concerts, their fans put the music up on the internet and it spread quickly throughout the file-sharing networks (BBC News). They became popular almost overnight. The band also declined to sign to a major label, but rather signed to and independent one (BBC News). Their popularity continued to grow without the help of the Big 4, but rather the help of the pirate revolution.

Another Musician, Franz Ferdinand's Alex Ferdinand, also felt file-sharing has helped him. He says:

File-sharing is something that has really helped us as a band in getting established. When we played a gig in New York for the first time, a lot of people there already knew our songs and were singing along. For us it has been global word of mouth that has helped our progress, not hindered it. I don't think it is damaging musicians at all. Downloading music is as revolutionary an invention as the gramophone and I'm all for it (Kusek 95).

Fans and artist were happy with the new revolution, but the Big 4 was not. It obviously meant the demise for them and the imminent crumbling of their wall. But they quickly tried to counteract this growing commune of information.

The Desperate Patching of the Wall

The Big 4 was quick to respond. They created the RIAA to combat this new free flow of music. The new arm of the Big 4 sued Napster for the staggering amount of \$20 billion (Menta). Napster was taken by surprise and did not understand the suit. They claimed that their software allowed users access to a large database to find an certain artist quickly along with warning users against the illegal sharing of copyrighted material (Menta). After this, the RIAA continued to bully file-sharing networks such as Kazaa and Bolt.

One action that effectively paints a potrait of the RIAA character was the suit they brought against MP3.com. MP3.com was site that allowed user to backup their CDS on their servers and listen to them anytime. It was possible for people to upload music that wasn't theirs, but that was not under the sites control (Lessig 189). The RIAA quickly sued MP3.com for \$118 million. MP3.com quickly settled for \$54 million (Lessig 190).

The twist in this story happened when a member of the Big 4, Vivendi, purchased MP3.com. This member then turned around and sued the lawyers for ill-advising MP3.com (now part of Vivendi) in the legality of

Distribution of Profits Made From Compact Discs:

\$4-5 Recoding Label Profits

\$3-4 Distributor and Store Profits

\$1-2 Promotion and Advertising

\$1-2 Designing and Packaging

\$1-2 Recording and Studio Costs

\$1-2 Miscellaneous- shipping, musician's fess etc.

\$.50-1.50 artist's Royalty

(Park 27)

the website. This lawsuit alleged "that it should have been obvious that the courts would find this behavior illegal; therefore, this lawsuit sought to punish any lawyer who had dared to suggest that the law was less restrictive than the labels demanded" (Lessig, 190). Lawyers everywhere soon stayed clear of advising potential copyright-infringing companies.

From these suits, the Big 4 allegedly made \$400 million. But, even though they fought piracy on behalf of the artist, they gave nothing to the owner's of the music (Barak). They instead pocketed it and continued to fuel their creativity guzzling machine.

As if this wasn't enough, the RIAA went on to sue individuals from twelve year olds too senior citizens. No member of the community was safe and only the upper class could purchase the music that inspired creativity. "Pirates" have no other chose but to go underground and take their creativity with them (Lessig, 185-186). The capitalistic world above was left devoid of growth.



The Two Prophets of Music

One individual quickly stepped forward, under the shadow of the threatening Big 4. His name was Trent Reznor and he was fed up with the years of experience with the gluttonous record labels. He left his long time label, Interscope, to become completely free from its bonds. He said:

I have been under recording contracts for 18 years and have watched the business radically mutate from one thing to something inherently very different and it gives me great pleasure to be able to finally have a direct relationship with the audience as I see fit and appropriate (Phillips).

With these words, Trent began to wage his war against the Big 4. Along the way he met up with Saul Williams who he persuaded to release an album online for free with the option to pay five dollars for the same album, but with better sound quality (Buchanan). Saul agreed and released the Inevitable Rise and Liberation of NiggyTardust. Only 28,322 of the 154,449 people who downloaded paid five dollars (Sandoval). This was disheartening, but the duo new they were headed in the right direction.

Filled with animosity for the current music industry, Trent was determined to revamp the scene. In March 2008, he released a CD entitled Ghosts

I-IV on his website in several formats (figure 1). The album allegedly made \$1.6 million in the first week (Buskirk). This event echoed across the digital music scene, inspiring artist and fans alike as their connection strengthened. Trent had this to say about his success:

Hello-

First of all, a sincere THANK YOU for the response to Ghosts. We are all amazed at the reaction for what we assumed would be a quiet curiosity in the NIN catalog. My faith in all of you has been restored - let's all go have coffee somewhere (my treat)! (nin.com)

Conclusion

The music industry use to be what it claims it is today. But as tyrants stepped in and took the reins, the bubbling tar pit of creativity began to harden into a solid homogenized mess. No longer were there independent artists and fans stirring the pit to bring diversity bubbling to the top. Artists and fans instead took it upon themselves to light a fire under the pit to spur the growth of creativity and the abolishment of conformity. They pirated and they pirated a lot. As a result, artists were brought forth from the underground to connect with their fans. For a brief moment, fans weren't spoon fed who they should listen to and artist weren't forced to conform to survive. The RIAA desperately tried to shut this down, but artists such as Trent Reznor and Saul Williams came forward to stop this. They knew the middleman's time was up, the wall would crumble, fan-artist energy would connect, and a new music revolution would ensue.



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